

Dyess NCO fills in as 'Mr. Mom' during OEF

By Airman 1st Class Lindsey Maurice  
Dyess Public Affairs

Making ponytails and playing with dolls are some things most young single men never imagine themselves doing. But for one 25-year-old Dyess NCO, these tasks have become an everyday reality as a result of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Since November, Staff Sgt. Brian Nunley has been filling in as 'Mr. Mom' for 5-year-old Rachel and 6-year-old Chandler after their single father, Staff Sgt. Matt, deployed in support of OEF.

'I just want Matt to be able to concentrate on what he has to do over there and not have to worry about his children. I also want the kids to be okay and know that their daddy will be home soon,' said Nunley, who befriended Matt and his children when they were stationed together at Incirlik Air Base, Turkey, almost two years ago.

'Matt and I had both worked in the same squadron at (Incirlik), and we got along really well,' said the 7th Supply Squadron NCO in charge of the commander's support staff.

'After the USS Cole had been bombed, there was about a three-month period when the base was locked down, so we couldn't really do much,' Nunley said. 'I must have spent every weekend with Matt and the kids watching movies, playing games and things like that.'

After spending about a year together in Turkey, the two friends met up again at Dyess four months later.

'I was really lucky that Brian arrived at Dyess when he did,' said Matt, who deployed less than two months after Nunley's arrival. 'I had first received word I was going to deploy in late September. My sister came down from Colorado to watch the kids, but left a month later when I was told my deployment was canceled.'

'As fate would have it, not less than a week after my sister had left, I was notified I was going again and was on a plane two days later.'

'Brian, being the great guy he is, offered to watch the children,' Matt said. 'I had other options -- I could have sent them to Las Vegas to stay with my mom, or my sister could have come down again. But it really boiled down to what was best for the kids -- they know Brian better than anyone else, and I know that I can trust him.'

Nunley, who has been in the Air Force for almost six years, said his parenting skills have come a long way since he began taking care of the children more than three months ago.

'At first it was hard -- really hard,' Nunley confessed. 'It took a lot of adjustments for them and me to not only get used to living with one another, but also used to Matt not being around.'

The adjustment was helped along from family and friends, Nunley added

“I must have called my mom every night those first few weeks asking for advice,” Nunley said. “I would ask her about all the good stuff you don’t really learn until you become a parent -- how to answer the different questions they ask, the little tricks to get them to do homework, how to use reverse psychology.”

“For instance, it’s amazing how much goes into something as simple as giving a child a bath or putting a girl’s hair into a ponytail.”

“If you had only seen Rachel’s hair the first time I fixed it -- hair sticking out every which way. I’m sure everyone who saw me drop her off at daycare that morning was wondering, ‘What’s wrong with this guy?’ After that, I had (a co-worker) show me how to do Rachel’s hair right.”

But ponytails aren’t the only challenges the Tracey City, Tenn., native faces during his Mr. Mom experience.

“Everyday brings a new challenge,” Nunley said. “I think our biggest feat so far is getting a good daily routine down. Before, getting ready in the morning alone used to take about three hours. Now, we’ve worked it down to about one hour.”

“Time management after school is especially hard. Once we get home I have about three hours to work with Chandler on his homework, play with the kids, make and eat dinner, get them washed up and get them into bed.”

Another parenthood challenge Nunley has been forced to face is discipline.

“They’re both so cute, that it can be really hard to punish them sometimes,” Nunley said. “Before, when Matt was around and they did something bad, that was kind of funny. I could quietly look away and laugh. Now, I have to be the parent and send them to the corner and things like that -- it’s hard.”

“I’d be lying if I said it isn’t tough,” Nunley said. “Filling in as a single parent is definitely a challenging job, and at times, I’ve asked myself, ‘What have I gotten myself into?’

“But on the same note, it’s been a great experience. I couldn’t have been left in charge of two more wonderful children.”

However, with all Nunley has taken on, the most sensitive issue he faces is helping the children understand why their daddy had to go away,” he said.

“I told them their daddy is off fighting the bad guys to keep us safe here. They seem to understand how important that is.”

But Nunley said there are days when the kids wish all the bad guys were gone, so daddy can come home.”

Rachel’s teacher at the Dyess Child Development Center, Stella Valdez, has noticed the children have been thriving despite their father’s deployment.

“I’ve been very impressed with how well Brian has taken care of the children,” Valdez said. “Brian is a very positive influence on the children. They really are great for each other.”

Brian agrees he has learned much from his parental experiences.

“It’s amazing how much you can learn from two little kids,” Nunley said. “I’ve learned how to handle situations better -- not just at home with the kids, but

even at work. I'm a lot more patient now, and my people-skills have gotten better.

And, if you want to know what's going on in the cartoon channels, I can tell you just about everything.

With possibly only a month left until Matt's return, Nunley and the children are both excited.

It's going to be great when Matt comes home, Nunley said. The kids can hardly wait. One thing's for sure -- this has been one of those experiences I'll never forget.

I've really come to appreciate the time I've spent with them and I feel good about what I'm doing -- I guess it can be looked at as another way of serving America.